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ABSTRACT

College composition teachers should get to know students as individuals through such methods as talking to them outside of class, holding teacher/student conferences and in-class writing workshops, and working with them in small groups. Teachers also need to know all they can about their students as a group of learners who are experiencing the crises of late adolescence. After trying to identify who their students are, teachers need to develop a framework for teaching the elements of composition in a systematic manner; one such framework involves the teaching of invention, arrangement, and style. Teachers should help students find and structure the information they need, give them constant practice in writing, help them learn to write for an audience, and stress the pleasure that comes in writing. Finally, teachers should realize that--as is suggested by student responses to an informal survey--a teacher's positive attitude and enthusiasm may be the most critical factors in motivating students to write. (GW)

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Writing Worth Doing

Vygotsky says, "A true and full understanding of another's thought is possible only when we understand its affective-volitional basis,"[1] a charge that is too strong to ignore, but if I think about it too much before Monday morning, I get the same feeling I get before a dental appointment--at eight o'clock I'll have to go, but I sure won't be ready. How could I, or the university where I teach, or the educational system for that matter, think that I could become attune to the affective-volitional basis of seventy-two individual reasons for writing? Vincent needs to know that I don't share the prejudice that he writes about in every paper because his world is so full of it. Mary can't possibly make another D. Norman has only enjoyed writing one paper in his life, the time I let him "free-associate." (As he puts it, he's just now really gotten into Freud. I dare not mention Jung to him.) George can't understand why when he tries his hardest, he can't make his writing turn out like that of E.B. White. And Mark hopes I find it reassuring that my standards are consistent with those across the country. He has already taken Freshman Writing once at another university, and he is making the same grade in my class he made there. Seventy-two students--seventy-two reasons to write. An awesome responsibility--but one I cannot escape. Thinking about all of this the other day, I realized that this session is misnamed. It

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probably should be called "Motivating Teachers to Teach."

Let me create a hypothetical situation for a moment. Imagine the first day of the first semester of the first year of a student's college career. Picture the standard setting: rows of students, quiet because they do not know each other well enough yet to venture conversation, facing teacher, not quiet because the students will get the impression she has nothing to say. Who has the greatest number of questions in that situation? And, if suspended judgments have anything to do with motivation, whose judgments are the most suspended? If I am typical, I will try to use my own experience to answer these two questions. I probably have the most questions that first day, because I have been there before and know the right questions to ask. Will this semester be different? Is it in fact a chance to start over? Will I accomplish what I intend to? Will I be able to motivate the students before me? Most of the students will be sitting there with very few questions, except maybe will this person be easy or hard, and will I be able to get a good grade. Most of their questions are already answered: another composition course like all composition courses in which I will once again learn the difference between a noun and a pronoun, trust to luck that I'll be able to catch most of my spelling errors, hope that I remember enough of the punctuation rules to get through, and be able to come up with finished products that will get me out of here.

Now, what about suspended judgments? The teacher has been there before; therefore, he probably feels that he has a pretty good grasp of most of the answers to his questions. On the other hand, the relationship between the questions that the students are asking and what writing as an activity is about are so far removed from each other that those students on that first day of the new semester might as well be kindergarten children on the first day of their first year, without the plaid dresses of course. At that point, if the students knew the right questions to ask about writing, they would have no answers. Perhaps it is they who need the least motivation of all--they are there, to the end of the semester, open to whatever happens in the class. To the extent that we as teachers can realize who our students are, what our subject matter is, and even that we have a subject matter, and to the extent that we can involve the students in our "grand and ultimate goals," the motivations are built in.

We hurry in all directions: through the book, back to the basics, past the literacy crisis, and home to grade papers. My central question in thinking about all of these journeys is do they always start in the right place? With the individual student? I find it difficult to accept that we teach writing the same way no matter who the students are or what they care about. I know too well from studies of self-fulfilling prophesies, that my willingness to suspend judgment and my willingness to believe that everyone can be helped to find what he or she has

to say determines my effectiveness. Students must be free to develop a sense of themselves. I think it is important for students to adopt the persona of "student," but if we have alternatives available in our classrooms, the students participate in the creation and re-creation of that persona. And when we assess what is happening in our classes, we have to be willing to perceive what actually is happening, not our preconceptions of what should be happening, a feat of honesty not easy to achieve. The best ways I have discovered to get the know the students as individuals is to talk to them outside of class, to make conferences an integral part of my teaching and to assure them by reminding them often that they are welcome in my office whenever I can help, to have in-class writing workshops during which they work on their papers while I circulate around the room, and to work in small groups often, groups in which I too participate.

I can see nothing wrong with our having those "ultimate goals" I mentioned before, providing we remind ourselves that the students see the work on a day-to-day basis. The knowledge that they conceive of their tasks as daily makes it impossible to embark on what John Holt has called the "one-way, don't-look-back-it's-too-awful" strategy.[2] Our students do not know if they are good writers or not. We have to help them to be honest about their writing. That means giving up some of our autonomy and doing so willingly. That means answering the question, "Will you be disappointed if I only turn in three

pages?" by another question, "Will you be?"

Beyond knowing our students as individuals, we need to know all we can about them as a group of learners. If our students are more interested in the character of Darth Vader in "Star Wars" than in Hamlet, we have to be willing to let them be. We have to know, for example, about the freshman rites of passage, so eloquently described in James L. Kinneavy's recent article in Freshman English News, "Freshman English: An American Rite of Passage,"[3] that the college experience embodies three of the seven basic crises: social puberty, advancement to a higher class, and occupational specialization. We have to know the work done by Erikson and given validation by James E. Marcia in his study, "Development and Validation of Ego-Identity Status,"[4] that for the period of late adolescence with which we deal there are four levels of ego-identity: identity achievement in which a student has experienced a crisis period and is committed to an occupation and ideology; identity diffusion in which a student has not made a commitment regarding occuration and is uninterested in ideological matters; moratorium status in which a student is in an active struggle to make commitments; and foreclosure in which a student expresses commitment without experiencing a crisis. And because of these levels, we have to be willing to accept a variety of topics in any set of papers, from "What is Reality?" to "How Can I Avoid the Freshman Ten (Pounds, That Is)," knowing that each paper may have as much significance to the writer as

the other, regardless of how trivial it seems to us.

Having tried to identify who our students are, I want to talk about those "grand and ultimate goals." I think those goals are very important--in other words, what our subject is. Otis M. Walter in an excellent article on starting points has this to say, "What a man means by rhetoric has sometimes led to great and sometimes to petty systems of rhetoric. When one defines rhetoric as the art of ornamenting a composition, one can hardly reach the heights achieved by those who meant by rhetoric the art of giving strength to truth, or the means of preventing misunderstandings, or, even, the art of discovering the available means of persuasion."[5] We need a framework, a guiding sense of where it is we are going, and we need to share that sense with our students. If they do regard our classes on a day-to-day, task-to-task basis, imagine how bizarre our sometimes "catch-as-catch-can" assignments must seem to them. Our definition of what we teach will determine the value of the outcome.

I suspect that there are many good frameworks. In my own class I simply use invention, arrangement, and style because this framework provides a way of approaching in a systematic fashion all of the things that I think are connected with composition. Invention opens the way to creating exercises in free writing, stream-of-consciousness writing, brain-storming, and also exercises which develop patterns of thinking: Burke's pentad, Young, Becker, and Pike's particle-wave-field, and others.

Arrangement opens the way for analyzing the commitment and response a writer makes in a paper or a paragraph, both in students' own writing and in the writing of professionals. And finally, style provides a time to talk about and to work on revising and editing in particular. The most frustrating thing about teaching writing is that everything should be thought about all at once on the first day. Since that cannot happen, since language forces a partiality on us, I think it is important for the students to understand our pattern for the approach to teaching writing.

S.M. Halloran in "On the End of Rhetoric, Classical and Modern"[6] describes a world that is no longer knowable, a world in which each of us must articulate his own world. Given a world that is no longer knowable, the roles of the teacher and the students in a class have to change. The teacher can no longer disseminate information solely, but has to assume the role of helping students to find the information they need and to structure that information. The teacher must stress that there is no one answer to a given problem, but many answers, and he must help the student learn to choose the answer needed at a particular time. The student must be motivated by the need to discover a piece of information because it is useful to his own work.

Students should not be made to feel alone. We often label students as bad writers, but the reality of the situation is that most students come to us as non-writers. And since

the only difference between a writer and a non-writer is that a writer writes, the most important thing to be done in a writing class is to insure that students write, with writing defined as an action, not going through the motions. One way of insuring writing that I use in the classroom is the in-class journal, ten minutes of writing in class on a topic of my choosing or theirs. I use this procedure to give practice in personas, tones, organizational patterns, free writing.

I also believe that it is important that a student discover his relationship with an audience, a relationship that Kenneth Burke has described as "an arousing and fulfillment of desires,"[7] more simply commitment and response to that commitment. Finally, I think we too often fail to stress the pleasure that comes in writing, of becoming through our words, and that is something the students can take with them beyond the next four years to the rest of their lives, whether they use writing for a letter to a friend or an article for a scholarly journal.

Last of all, I want to talk about the most important part of motivation, the teacher. I did an informal survey with my four classes, asking them a variety of questions regarding their own understanding of what motivates them to write, an understanding remember that might be quite different from the reality. I was not surprised by the results of the questionnaire. Answers to most items varied. Some felt that

the essays in the anthology motivated them to write; others did not. Some felt that sharing the writing of their classmates motivated them to write; others did not. Most agreed they liked to be given an aim for their writing, but they wanted to be free to specify the topic. Most suggested there should be a variety of activities in the classroom, although most of their suggested activities were things we had done. Most liked the in-class journal. But, only three out of the seventy-two said that the teacher had nothing to do with their motivation. The word repeated over and over to describe the ideal teacher was "enthusiastic." Even more indicative were their comments:

"A teacher's attitude does affect my interest in writing, in that my creativity is based on the teacher's disposition. A teacher who is easy to communicate with lessens the constricting bonds of the frightened mind which easily becomes inhibited."

"I enjoy a teacher who gets really interested in her students and enthusiastic about teaching. I like her to suggest topics rather than make us write on just one subject. The teacher should have an open mind upon reading the papers also."

"An ideal attitude would be for her to first enjoy teaching and having the experience to help the students. Second, when a student comes to her for help or some information she is willing to help that student the best way she knows how."

"My essay teacher in high school only approached it as

'Oh, I know you've got to do this boring essay, so let's just hurry up and get it out of the way.' Well, you can't help but adopt a teacher's attitude towards the subject. If they're really enthusiastic you get that way too. I'm really getting excited about approaching it more creatively."

The fact that the teacher was the only consistent factor in their motivations is not surprising. We are the only consistent factor in the composition class. Remember Vincent and Mary and Norman?

When asked what sort of comments a teacher writes on their papers motivated them to do better, their replies were that they liked to be told the strengths of the paper. They wanted to be told the weaknesses, too, but they wanted some comments about how they could improve. Most seemed to agree that specific suggestions helped the most. One student wrote that he was discouraged by "very critical comments that <u>almost</u> seem to say, 'Man, what a stupid thing to do. You're really dumb.'"

Where do we get the enthusiasm the students described? From the excitement of discovering the reason for writing with each of our students, from knowing that our framework, our paradigm is important enough to demand our energy and that of our students too. We get that enthusiasm from knowing that our definition of rhetoric is worthwhile and may have something in it that the students can take beyond the door of our classroom. Sylvia Ashton Warner says of her work

with the Maori infants, "A child's writing is his own affair and is an exercise in integration which makes for better work. The more it means to him the more value it is to him. And it means everything to him. It is part of him as an arranged subject could never be."[8] I am convinced that the writing that a college student does is not that different.

How will we know when we have motivated students? I was on a panel last year speaking to a group of teaching assistants, and one of the panel members said she really did not think you see much improvement in students' writing during the semester. I suppose it depends on how you evaluate that improvement. When a student comes in and says that he finds himself working out a problem in writing, or another student says she is writing letters to everyone, and then you see that carry over into the papers you receive, so that the students are not producing the five-paragraph theme but important problems, seriously and soundly expressed, then I consider that progress. And when that happens, I remember the words of Yeats: "Be secret and exult, / Because of all things known / That is most difficult."

Notes

[1]L. Vygotsky, Thought and Language (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962), p. 150.

[2]John Holt, How Children Fail (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc.), p. 10.

[3]James L. Kinneavy, "Freshman English: An American Rite of Passage," Freshman English News, 6, No. 1 (Spring, 1977).

[4]James E. Marcia, "Development and Validation of Ego-Identity Status," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 3 (1966), 551-59.

[5]Otis M. Walter, "On Views of Rhetoric, Whether Conservative or Progressive," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 49 (December, 1963), 367-382.

[6]S.M. Halloran, "On the End of Rhetoric, Classical and Modern," College English, 36 (1975), 621-31.

[7]Kenneth Burke, from Counter-Statement, reprinted in "The Nature of Form," Contemporary Rhetoric, ed. W. Ross Winterowd (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.), 183-199.

[8]Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Teacher (New York: Simon and Schuster), p. 54.